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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PGOV PTER PREL SY
SUBJECT: SYRIAN MP SAYS INTELL CHIEF WANTS TO BE FRIENDS

REF: DAM 150

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for
reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: This is a corrected copy of Damascus 0270.
Please disregard previous version. A Syrian MP and
businessman told us January 24 that, despite a U.S. decision
to freeze the assets of Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI)
chief Asif Shawqat, the intelligence head still considered
himself a friend of the United States and wanted to resume
bilateral intelligence sharing. Later in the conversation
the MP mentioned the recent arrest and detention here of
several al-Qaida members. Although the MP said that the
Syrian public and SARG officials felt relaxed and in a
position of strength, he also noted that Syrian President
Asad might be too worried about internal threats to travel
outside Syria. On the purported offer of renewing
intelligence sharing, Post assesses that there is less here
than meets the eye. There have been numerous indications
over the past few months that the SARG -- with Shawqat's
endorsement -- is not interested in re-engaging on
intelligence cooperation unless it represents part of an
(unacceptable) package deal with the U.S. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Syrian MP and businessman Hashem Akkad, known to have
close ties to SMI chief Asif Shawqat (reftel), told Econchief
and Poloff January 24 that despite a U.S. decision to freeze
Shawqat's assets, the intelligence head still considered
himself a friend of the United States and wanted to resume
bilateral intelligence sharing. Syrian President Bashar
al-Asad had made the original decision in 2005 to sever the
intelligence link against Shawqat's wishes, but Shawqat could
persuade Asad to reverse that position, said Akkad, who
acknowledged that he is a close Shawqat confidant. The SMI
chief was interested in resuming intelligence cooperation
because it would make his job easier, the MP said.

¶3. (C) Later in the conversation (as if it had just occurred
to him), Akkad noted recent arrests by Syrian authorities of
several members of al-Qaida who were being detained here.
The al-Qaida members, who had based their operations in
Syria, had been planning attacks on SARG authorities and
foreign diplomats and facilities, Akkad said. None of the
detainees were sought by U.S. authorities, said Akkad, who
also noted that several were from African countries,
including Somalia. The arrests were not public knowledge,
Akkad confided.

¶4. (C) To discuss the resumption of intelligence sharing and
"other matters," the USG should arrange for a meeting between
high-level U.S. officials and Shawqat either in Damascus or
in the United States, Akkad said. When asked about specific

topics for such a meeting, Akkad asserted that Syria could not accept the U.S. "package of demands" as it stood. Syria could make concessions on Iraq but could not eject Palestinian rejectionist groups ("where would they go?") or support the disarmament of Hizballah without a significant political tradeoff, he said. "We won't give up our cards for nothing," Akkad said. The Syrian regime and the Syrian public want a peace deal with Israel, asserted Akkad, noting that President Bashar al-Assad is more genuine in this regard than his father. On WMD, Syria would also resist concessions without Israeli commitments on its nuclear arms, Akkad said. No country in the region supported the annihilation of Israel, claimed Akkad, who brushed aside a question about Syria-Iran ties by saying Damascus would not need that alliance if it had a better relationship with Israel and the U.S.

¶15. (C) Asked about the political climate, Akkad said that the Syrian public and the SARG felt relaxed and in a position of strength. Domestically, not many Syrians watched President Asad's January 21 televised speech because they no longer felt nervous about Syria's stand-off with the West, Akkad claimed. Asked whether President Asad would be traveling soon, Akkad thought a while and said he was not aware of any presidential travel plans. Then he commented, "The President might be too worried to travel outside of the country for fear of internal threats like those in Mauritania." When asked to elaborate, Akkad said, "There is no threat from people on the left because they offer the country nothing. The threat is from people on the right (regime insiders) who have something to bring to the table."

¶16. (C) Comment: Post assesses that there is less here than meets the eye. There have been numerous indications over the past few months that the SARG -- with Shawkat's endorsement -- is not interested in re-engaging on intelligence cooperation unless it represents part of a package deal, with the U.S., at a minimum agreeing to stop publicly criticizing the SARG. The SARG, as the Ahmadinejad visit demonstrates, has calculated that, given its perception of its interest and of U.S. policy, there is no hope of any improvement in relations with the U.S., including any engagement on the intelligence level, for the foreseeable future.

¶17. (C) Comment Continued: The conversation with Akkad also demonstrates a repeated pattern where Syrian interlocutors present themselves, in the course of our routine contact work, as intermediaries who represent heavyweight regime principals interested in starting up back-channel dialogue, all of whom we have disabused of such ambitions. The Akkad conversation also illustrates the curious, symbiotic relationship that exists between many of our elite contacts, whether businessmen, former officials, or prominent intellectuals, with paladins in the security services. The prestige, power, and reach, both financial and repressive, of the security services, is such that Syrians like Akkad feel compelled to maintain good relations with one or more protectors and benefactors and to reveal such relations to Emboffs to make clear their own importance and influence.

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